

## Megan Sullivan Interview Podcast - Transcript

### National Resource Center for Healthy Marriages and Families

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Megan Sullivan: We talk about a lot of difficult things with children, in school, as counselors, etc. But we don't really talk about incarceration. I'm not suggesting that people talk ad nauseam about prison or incarceration, but it is a fact of life.

Male VO: It is a fact of life for many Americans. In the United States, which holds the world's highest incarceration rate, approximately 1 in 28 children have a parent in prison.

Incarceration can negatively impact a person's family in a number of ways. Not only do many families face significant financial and employment challenges, but relationships are also strained. Children, spouses, coparents, and extended family cope with long time away from a loved one and often face the stigma of having a family member in prison. Furthermore, these relationships are tested after the incarcerated individual returns home and assimilates back into daily life.

Fortunately, the latest research shows that steps can be taken to alleviate these tensions and pains.

Welcome to the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families podcast: *Meet the Author with Megan Sullivan*. The goal of the Resource Center is to promote the values of healthy marriage and relationship education skills, and support the integration of safety-net service systems as a holistic approach to strengthening families through discussions with experts from the field. Our podcast series highlights authors of free, research-based resources available through the Resource Center.

For this podcast, we spoke with Megan Sullivan, associate dean for faculty development at Boston University and author of a Resource Center tip sheet entitled, "For Caregivers: Helping Children of Incarcerated Individuals." She has done extensive research on supporting children and families with an incarcerated parent, and her children's book, *Clarissa's Disappointment*, is intended for children facing these challenges.

During this podcast, you will hear Megan discuss communication tips, helpful resources, and the latest research behind supporting children of incarcerated parents. As the conversation began, Robin Cenizal, the project director for the Resource Center, asked Ms. Sullivan about her recent research on this topic.

Robyn Cenizal: Well, hi, Megan. It is so great to have you with me here today to talk about this. I'm so excited. You and I first met last year at the Prisoner's Family Conference, and you were

there presenting on some interesting research that you've been doing. Why don't we start by telling us a little bit more about that research?

Megan Sullivan: Great. Thank you. I agree, Robyn. It's wonderful that we're able to do this. At that conference, I was talking about a book that I helped coedit called *Parental Incarceration: Personal Accounts and Developmental Impact*. And that's more of an academic book, but it really looks at the latest research and best practices on children of incarcerated parents. But it also includes 35 pieces of writing by adults from across the country who reflect on how they think their parent incarceration impacted them when they were children.

We had people who were still incarcerated who talked about the fact that they — or people who were incarcerated — talked about how they think their parent incarceration did or did not impact them. And then we had people who are working with others in the field of social work and prison ministry and other things. Even though they've never been incarcerated, they feel like their parent incarceration taught them some important lessons that they could then help others with.

Robyn Cenizal: That's awesome. It's wonderful how we can turn negative experiences into something positive and benefit others. That's great. So, you've dedicated much of your professional experience from research and writing, and including this children's book that we're going to talk about soon, to providing resources and support for children with incarcerated parents. Why is this issue so important to you? Is there a personal story there?

Megan Sullivan: There is. There is. There are really two reasons why this is important to me. The first is the very real fact of mass incarceration. And that families and communities are more impacted than ever. So, for a long time, even though I never talked about my personal relationship to incarceration, the more I started reading about mass incarceration and the number of families affected, the more I realized that I had to talk about my own interest and my own experience.

So, when I was 10 years old, my father, who was a lawyer, was arrested and incarcerated, and he received a two- to five-year sentence for larceny. And I knew that that impacted me and my siblings, but for years I didn't really know how, and I never really talked about it. It wasn't the kind of thing my family talked about or my community talked about. So I just kind of went along with my life and my career. And then when I started to read more about mass incarceration, I realized, wait a minute, I have something to offer here. So, that's why, sort of at the midpoint in my career, I finally started to do some more academic research on this, and I started to write about it.

Robyn Cenizal: That's awesome. It's wonderful that you're in a position where you're comfortable sharing your story now. And I'm sure that it's very helpful for others to hear that and how it has impacted you, and how you've been able to turn it into a positive for others who are in similar situations.

Male VO: Megan's personal story clearly influenced her academic focus, but she has also turned this passion into a children's book. Recently she published *Clarissa's Disappointment*, which illustrates the difficulties that children and families face during the reentry process. Robyn asked Megan what inspired her to write a children's book rather than a personal memoir.

Megan Sullivan: The more I read, and the more I thought about it, and the more I talked to people, I realized that, really, who I wanted to reach were children. And I also wanted to reach the parents and teachers and counselors who work with them. So, I thought the best way to do this wouldn't be through a memoir that would really be for adults but would be a children's book.

So, I thought about a character. I imagined a character who was a 9-year-old girl named Clarissa, who isn't me, but whose experience in the book is informed by my own personal experiences. And I began to write a book, that — with her voice, a book where she would be speaking. And I ended up with a middle-grade fiction reader, so, really, something for about 8- to 12-year-old readers.

Robyn Cenizal: That's awesome. And what should children with incarcerated parents know while their parent is incarcerated?

Megan Sullivan: Yeah. That's a great question. I think there are a lot of things they should know. I think the first thing is that no two children are alike. Even though those children and families who experience incarceration may experience very similar things, no two children are alike. So — and no two families are alike. So, depending on the family circumstance, what the child should know and how the child might react might be different.

Let's take my family, for example. So, my family had a lot of privileges in many ways. First of all, we were white. Second of all, we — my father was a lawyer, so he was considered somebody who, even though he was sentenced to a maximum-security prison, he was considered someone who had committed a white-collar crime. So, there were certain things that my family had that other families might not have had.

However, there were certain things that affected me that affect all children of incarcerated parents. For example, as is the case with many children, when my father went to prison, my family had no money. So we went from having money to having nothing. And so, we had to deal with that kind of thing. There was some stigma. That was something I had to deal with, and that's something children might have to deal with, and they should know about.

Robyn Cenizal: And are there specific things that those who are working with those children, in the family, or teachers or counselors who are specific to those children, are there certain things that they need to know about the children?

Megan Sullivan: Yes, I think there are. I think that, as I said, no two children or families are alike, but, certain things that teachers, counselors, and others should think of — A: Has the child been told about a parent's incarceration? You'd be surprised by the number of families where they

don't talk about it. They say, you know, Daddy's working in another town, or Mommy had to go away for a little while, but they don't tell the children. I think they're doing it because they think it's the best thing for the children, but I'm not sure that it is the best thing. So, I think the first thing people have to realize is, you know, they have to know how much the child knows.

And then, I always suggest that people take their cue from the child. If the child knows, does the child seem to want to talk about it? Does he or she seem afraid or uncertain? So, I think those are certain basic assumptions.

The other thing to do is, I really like the idea that in the past several years, we've begun to think that incarceration or parental incarceration is what we might consider an adverse childhood experience. That is, it's like other forms of other experiences that can be traumatic to children, like divorce, loss, abuse, etc. When we consider incarceration an adverse childhood experience, we can then say, oh, OK, we know this child has an incarcerated parent. So that should signal us to sort of think about whether or not — or talk to the child about whether or not it affects them. And not in the sense that we're judging that. Not in the sense that we think, oh, this child must feel "X" because he has an incarcerated parent. We don't make that assumption. But we make the assumption that, wait a minute, this might be something we might want to check in on.

So, if we hear that a child has an incarcerated parent, and we're a counselor or a teacher, we don't judge how the child might feel. We don't judge how they might want to talk, but we recognize that they might want to talk. That there might be something going on there. And that we can, sort of, open a dialogue with them.

Male VO: As the conversation continued, Robyn and Megan discussed the advantages and drawbacks of visitation on family relationships. Megan acknowledged that while research on the topic is mixed, visitation can positively impact the reentry process.

Megan Sullivan: First of all, we can't make the assumption that just because a person is incarcerated, he or she is necessarily a bad parent. The two don't necessarily go hand in hand. In fact, often, you know, it's quite the opposite. Again, depending upon why the person is in prison.

Obviously, if they're in prison for abuse or something like that with the child, then it might not be the safest thing. But assuming there's a good relationship, and the parent is a stable parent, then I think it's a good thing. I think the problem is that when parents and children don't talk or communicate or visit each other when they're in prison, the reentry is very difficult. Or when the parent comes home, it's very difficult. And then the vast majority of incarcerated people will return to their homes and communities. And if children don't know how to talk to their parents, then I think that's problematic.

I'll give you an example, and then I'll tell you one other quick thing. So, when I was a child, my parents did not want my siblings or I to visit my father in prison. My father didn't want us to see him there. My mother wasn't sure how it would affect us. And today, I respect their decisions.

They were both loving parents. But, I think that it was harder for my siblings and I, even though we wrote my father when he was in prison and we exchanged letters, we didn't talk to him for two years, because we couldn't afford what were then collect phone calls. I think it was very difficult for us to talk to our father when he came home. And I think the reentry process would have been easier if we had had conversations, whether they were phone conversations or visitations when he was incarcerated.

The last point I want to make is that one pretty far-ranging study looked at the effects of visitation. And, really, what they found out is that visitation definitely helps parents in prison, and that they couldn't say one way or the other with children. So, again, I think it's an individual thing, and it depends on the relationship between the parent and the children.

Robyn Cenizal: You mentioned that maintaining that communication can help with the reentry transition. Are there other challenges that children face during the reentry phase when their parent does come home?

Megan Sullivan: Yes, there are. I think that we talk far too little about the reentry phase. And I think we know, for example, we've done research, that family commitment helps with recidivism. So, we know that there's a direct relationship between good family relationships and incarcerated persons. And the fact that incarcerated people who have good relationships may well not go back to prison. So, we know that, but we've done far less research on the difficulty of reentry for families and, indeed, for the incarcerated people.

People can do well with the reentry. And I think that's one thing I want my children's book to say to children — that things can go well. No matter what happens with the family, no matter — in the book, the parents I look at were not sure if they were going to remain together at the end, but it's very clear that they will always remain a family. And I think it's important to let families know that the reentry period can be difficult, but it can also be a positive experience.

Some of the difficulties have to do with the fact that when an incarcerated person returns to his community, his or her community, or neighborhood, or family, etc., oftentimes they have to look for employment. Sometimes there are substance abuse issues. Sometimes it's simply difficult leaving prison and going to a home or reestablishing your life outside. And then sometimes there are changed family dynamics. Let's say for example that a father's been in an intact family. There's been an intact family, and then the father goes to prison, and then five or 10 years later he comes home. Chances are that the dynamics in that family are going to be different, because they've had to be in the father's absence. So, that can create tension in a family. It's not tension that can't be surmounted. It can be, but I think it's just good for us to be realistic with children and families.

Robyn Cenizal: It's also, financially, you know, there's a big difference, obviously, lots of financial transition and hope that the returning family member can get employed quickly and the challenges that go along with all of that. So, definitely good information there.

Male VO: While much of Megan’s research pertains to the impact of parental incarceration on children, she has great experience looking at the caregiver's perspective; that is, other parents or relatives who care for the child. In 2016, Megan worked with The Resource Center to produce a tip sheet entitled “For Caregivers: Helping Children of Incarcerated Parents.” Robyn asked Megan about its intended audience.

Megan Sullivan: So, the tip sheet is really intended for two different audiences. The first one is directly for caregivers, for those people who are caring for children whose parents are incarcerated. Whether that is the other parent, whether it's grandparents, which is often the case, whether it's aunts and uncles, etc. All of those people who are direct caregivers to children, I think could benefit from this. But I also think a, kind of, secondary and less explicit audience is those people who encounter children of incarcerated parents. There's a lot in that tip sheet that can be helpful for them, too. For example, I talk about how to communicate, how to talk to a child in your care who has a parent in prison or jail. But a lot of the things I talk about can really be applicable to anyone — for a church minister, a teacher, a counselor, a neighbor, a friend, etc.

Robyn Cenizal: That's great. And why did you think that was so important to focus on that perspective?

Megan Sullivan: Well, for the perspective for the caregiver, I thought it was important, because caregivers are so overlooked. I mean, again, we're starting to have some research in the last 40 years on children of incarcerated parents. We have some research on incarcerated people themselves. But we haven't done a lot to really examine and support caregivers. And they're often people who, because of circumstances, didn't expect to be raising a child at a certain point in their lives. And, again, often this is grandparents. And so, I think at this point, we really — we know that a lot of grandparents and other people are raising children, so let's support them so that we can support children and families. So that was the main reason I thought it should be done. And, again, the less explicit audience, I think that we could all use a way to talk to and think about incarcerated children, whether we're neighbors, or counselors, or judges, or parish ministers, etc.

Robyn Cenizal: I so appreciate that. And I think, you know, you mentioned earlier, as we were talking about the stigma associated with having a parent that's incarcerated, and sometimes children think they're the only ones. Or even the family members may think of themselves as the only ones. But one of the things that jumped out at me in the tip sheet was the fact that there are 2.7 million children who currently have a parent in prison or jail. Clearly, they are not alone. There are a lot of other families that are dealing with the same types of challenges. And I just commend you for raising awareness of this issue and offering some practical advice on how families and caregivers can navigate some of these challenges.

Megan Sullivan: Thank you.

Robyn Cenizal: What would be the biggest piece of advice that you would give someone who is communicating with a child about their parent?

Megan Sullivan: Yes, I think what you say is really important, and that is that children and families don't have to be alone. I think the biggest piece of advice, I would I say, is to reach out to organizations that might be able to help you. I always tell people, you know, you're right — in the tip sheet I put in some very specific people they could reach out to. But they can also just, you know, go to a computer and type in "children of incarcerated parents" and the state or town that they're in, and parents and families and children will get a list of organizations that might be able to help them.

And, usually, organizations have different focus points. There might be one organization that helps people get to a prison to visit their loved one. There might be one organization that provides mentors for children. There might be another organization that simply helps families navigate the justice system. But there are organizations out there that help people. There are church groups that help. There are online groups that help people. So, I think the biggest thing is to reach out and try to get help or support. And it does — it truly does make things easier for people.

Male VO: Megan also alluded to the personal challenges that caregivers may face when supporting a child with an incarcerated parent. She discussed both the financial and emotional burdens facing caregivers, and the need for accessible resources. Additionally, caregivers may have strained relationships with the incarcerated individual, adding to the stress of the situation. Megan's advice?

Megan Sullivan: I encouraged grandparents — not just grandparents, all caregivers — to really think about what's best for the child. And, even though it might be difficult for the caregiver, just consider what the child might need and want, and then to try to figure out a way to work around that. Even if what that means — and for a minor, they have to have a caregiver who brings them into the prison. They can't go by themselves. So, even if that means the caregiver has to bring the child into the prison or jail, stay with them, but not necessarily interact with the parent if they don't want to. But if they think it's best for the child, then they really need to try to do that to the best of their abilities.

Robyn Cenizal: Excellent advice. And I'm sure it is difficult for some, especially where the parent who is in prison, perhaps, has burned that bridge, not been the best family member prior to going to prison. I can see where that would be very difficult. But I think your advice is well-said, to try to focus on what's best for the child.

And, as you mentioned, talking about bringing the child in for visitation, do you have some tips for how to prepare the child for the visit? Is there a conversation that, perhaps, the caregiver should have with the child prior to visitation?

Megan Sullivan: Yes, I think there is. I think that children are better when they know what's coming. And it's not so good for children when they're left only to their imaginations. For example, I refer to my own experience. I didn't know anything about a prison or jail, so the only thing I knew was what I saw on TV and the movies, and that was not great. That frightened me. And then because I never went into one, all I did was think about the worst aspects of it.

So, I think it's important to try to sit a child down and say, you know, "Here's what you might see when you go see Mommy or Daddy." And maybe caregivers don't know, but most departments of corrections have online information on some of what they can expect when they walk into a prison. They can at least find out where the visitor center is, how and when can you make calls, or can prisoners make calls to you, etc. So, you can find out some information.

There are also books. At Rutgers University, there's the Children of Prisoners Library, and it really has an excellent array of books and materials that can teach people. It's about what to expect when you visit a parent, or there is some information on there about that. And I think it's good for caregivers to look that up beforehand, and to try to talk to the child a little bit about what they might expect.

If families have lawyers, or if they have a social worker, they can find out what kind of visitation the child might face. Will there be direct contact? Will they only be talking to a parent over the phone? Will there be a glass screen? Will there be a prison visiting room where a parent and children can sit down together and play a game? I think the more knowledge the better.

Robyn Cenizal: Great. Great. I think you're right. And it is, you know, kind of a scary place if you've never been in there. And the process of going through and having to be patted down and everything, be checked and all that kind of stuff. It can be a little bit intimidating if you're not accustomed to the experience.

Male VO: Towards the end of the conversation, Megan offered some poignant advice for anyone working with children of incarcerated parents. She mentioned that kids, regardless of their environment, are still just kids. It is important, then, to find ways to keep them engaged and provide a community of a support through activities such as music, sports, or camp.

Megan Sullivan: For example, I just learned about a camp in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, that's offered every summer. I think it's offered by a church community. But it's offered every summer for children in Massachusetts who have been affected by incarceration, whether it's a family member or a parent who is incarcerated. They go to the camp for a week every summer, and they have crafts, and they have swimming, and they have everything.

And I recently spoke with the director of the camp, and she said, "We don't talk to them about incarceration. It's not something that we bring up. We just treat them like children." I thought, you know what, there's something to be said for that, too.

So, my recommendation is to reach out if you feel like you need support, but also just help a child do whatever he or she needs to do to feel good about him or herself, and that will translate to a child who is more comfortable.

Robyn Cenizal: I think that's excellent advice. And it goes back to your comment earlier about this experience of having an incarcerated parent being just one of the many adverse childhood experiences that children may experience. It isn't a label. So, we should think of them as

children, first, who are dealing with these certain situations, but not just as the child of an incarcerated parent. That's excellent.

I want to mention that the tip sheet that we've been talking about is available on the National Resource Center website in our library. And I want to give you a chance to tell folks a little bit more about *Clarissa's Disappointment* and where they can get your book.

Megan Sullivan: Oh, thank you so much. That's great. Yes. So, *Clarissa's Disappointment* was just published this year in February of 2017. And people can get it on Amazon, and they can also get it at [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com). And I'm working hard to get as many public libraries and school libraries as possible to get the book, so that people can read it that way, too.

So, *Clarissa's Disappointment* is, again, it's a fictional book, but loosely based on my own experience of a 9-year-old girl who is so excited at the beginning of the book. She's visiting her father for the last time in prison, and she's been visiting him — she and her mother have been visiting him for five years. And Clarissa is thrilled. She can't wait for her father to come home. And, while there are many wonderful things that happen when her father comes home, because her parents are very loving, it's difficult for Clarissa.

Things don't work out exactly as she expected them to. So, the book really follows her along in the ups and downs of what she experiences when her father is released from prison. And in the book, Clarissa begins, with the help of a teacher and a local community poet, to write about her feelings. And, so, the book becomes a little bit of a tale about literacy, too. That is, how we can read and write, and that helps us to figure out how we feel and what we think and say. And it can help us solve problems, too.

Robyn Cenizal: What a great way of introducing the concept of journaling. That's excellent.

Megan Sullivan: Thank you. And I also include in the book resources for teachers, counselors and families. So, that there's a section on how teachers could use the book. There's a section on how counselors can use the book to talk to children — all children, not just children of incarcerated parents — about things like disappointment, bullying, writing, journaling, incarceration itself. And then there's a section for families, of what families can do. For example, I suggest that families read the book first and then give it to a child, and ask the child if he or she wants to talk about it afterwards. My goal there was to give adults resources and children a sense that they're not alone. My hope was that maybe the two groups, the children and adult, would use the book to talk to each other, as well.

Male VO: To wrap up the conversation, Robyn asked Megan for any final words of wisdom.

Megan Sullivan: I think one thing I'd want to say is that, you know, people should really try not to judge a family by the fact that there is someone in it who may be incarcerated. A parent who is incarcerated is not necessarily a bad parent. The two can, well, easily be mutually exclusive.

And we have many parents in jail or prison who love their children and want the best for them. And we have many children who want to connect with their parents. So, I think the most I can say is, just, try not to be judgmental, and just try to, sort of, listen for what children and families might need.

Robyn Cenizal: Great advice. And thank you so much, again, Megan, not only for joining us today for this conversation, but for the work that you've been doing. It's just amazing. I find it fascinating, and I'd love to get off into a conversation about mass incarceration, but we'll save that for another day.

Megan Sullivan: Great. Thanks so much, Robyn. And thanks for your interest.

Male VO: Thanks for joining us, we hope you enjoyed the podcast. To learn more about healthy marriage and relationship education, key skills, and additional trainings and resources, please visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families at [www.HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.org](http://www.HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.org).

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